DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 389 RC 017 994

AUTHOR Bernal, Jesse R.; Villarreal, Diana
TITLE Discovering a Gold Mine of Strategies for At-Risk Students through Systematic Staff Development.
PUB DATE 7 Oct 90
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Rural Education Association (82nd, Colorado Springs, CO, October 5-8, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *Dropout Prevention; Elementary Secondary Education; Faculty Development; *High Risk Students; *Inservice Teacher Education; *Program Effectiveness; Rural Schools; Teacher Improvement

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an effective model of systematic staff development focusing on prevention and intervention strategies used with at-risk students. The following are key elements: (1) matching of the purposes of training to the goals of the school districts; (2) multiple and integrated activities; (3) participants' thorough orientation to the purpose and content of the development activities; (4) opportunities for collaboration among school staff such as information sharing, observing, mentoring, peer coaching, and planning; (5) ongoing opportunities for practice and information sharing; and (6) follow-up support and assistance between training sessions. The characteristics of effective training sessions and the contextual factors are briefly described. To address the unmet educational needs of the at-risk student population, the in-service training plan should be: (1) comprehensive, including detailed teachers' manuals, curriculum materials, lesson guides, and supportive material; (2) intensive, using one-to-one tutoring or individually-adapted computer-assisted instruction; (3) flexible, using student progress assessments to modify groupings or instructional content; and (4) preventive, emphasizing that students learn to read the first time they are taught. Schools can develop feasible programs to ensure that every child learns, but it will take effective in-service training that is individually tailored to meet those program goals. This paper contains 10 references. (ALL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED329389

Discovering a Gold Mine of Strategies for At-Risk Students Through Systematic Staff Development

Presentation
at the

82nd Annual Convention of the
NATIONAL RURAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Red Lion Inn
Colorado Springs, Colorado
October 5-8, 1990

By

Jesse R. Bernal
Training & Technical Assistance Associate
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL)
Austin, Texas

And

Diana Villarreal
Training Specialist
Migrant Education Program Development Center (MEPDC)
Kingsville, Texas

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jesse R. Bernal

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Sunday
October 7, 1990

10:00 - 10:45 AM

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

RC017994

Discovering A Gold Mine of Strategies for At-Risk Students Through Systematic Staff Development

Abstract

In order to maximize successful classroom implementation from inservice training in strategies for students at risk of dropping out of school, training must be systematic, promoting collegial interaction and fostering teacher support systems. This manuscript is not a "how-to" list of classroom strategies for addressing the needs of students at risk of dropping out of school. Furthermore, it does not propose to expand on the definition of "at-risk student" either. Instead, the real intent is to examine an effective model of systematic, staff development that will maximize the successful classroom implementation of preventive and intervention strategies used with at-risk students. The manuscript will review the research on effective inservice training. It will examine some of the learnings on effective inservice training as well as explain the context that supports its effectiveness. Finally, it will illustrate the key components of effective inservice training and the implications for rural at-risk students.

Background

In 1987, with special funding from Congress, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) and the eight other Regional Educational Laboratories (REL) began an ambitious series of projects focused on the needs of rural, small schools. Though the projects initially were authorized for only one year, SEDL's Rural, Small Schools Initiative (RSSI) project is now in its third year of service to the Southwestern region, including Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas. SEDL is no stranger to rural, small schools. Almost two-thirds of the school districts in its five-state region are both rural and small. Thus, SEDL, now in its twenty-third year of existence, recognizes that addressing the unique concerns of these districts is a significant part of its mission.

In its needs assessment among rural, small schools in the Southwestern region, the RSSI reviewed a range of materials, including SEDL-developed and other need-sensing surveys used to develop initial project plans, demographic reports, and other reports and interviews generated during Year One of the RSSI project. Five areas of need surfaced most consistently in those materials: (1) Funding/school finance issues; (2) concerns

related to recruiting and retaining qualified teachers; (3) student performance; (4) quality and scope of instruction; and (5) staff development.

Because of the increasing emphasis on staff development as a critical factor in school improvement, and because SEDL staff - along with national rural education specialists - perceived staff development as an effective mechanism for addressing other regionally identified needs, the RSSI conducted a survey on staff development practices and preferences among the region's rural, small schools. The survey indicated general, though lukewarm, satisfaction with current inservice practices. However, it revealed that most rural school districts lack plans and systems for providing staff development aimed at comprehensive school improvement. Survey respondents were also critical of several major aspects of current practice, including **the lack of**:

1. Systematic follow-up and implementation of skills and practices taught;

2. Opportunities for peer coaching and observation;

3. Flexibility in selecting staff development topics relevant to teachers' needs rather than to top-down mandates; and

4. Locally-planned and -conducted staff development activities.

Survey respondents also noted needs for activities focused on specific instructional topics and provision of "hands-on" materials that can be used in the classroom.

The RSSI's Approach to Systematic, Staff Development

Staff development has been the fundamental focus of the SEDL's RSSI project since the project began in 1987. Staff development, of course, is a **process** that requires **content** to give it substance. However, both the research literature and the RSSI's own survey of staff development practices in the Southwest's rural schools indicate that current staff development delivery systems are content rich and process poor. School staffs receive training in a myriad of topics, but not generally via the principles and approaches known to be most effective in encouraging classroom use of new knowledge and skills. Thus, while the RSSI's staff development efforts include a content focus -- thinking skills during Years One and Two and school improvement strategies in Years Two and Three -- project efforts concentrate on the generic process: on strengthening the abilities of schools and service providers to deliver effective staff development no matter what its content focus may be. Another important aspect of staff development involves context.

Much of the current literature focuses on comprehensive, locally-initiated and locally-implemented programs in which staff development encompasses not only formal training sessions but also a range of other activities. Staff development is viewed as a systematic process that occurs in stages over an extended period, usually several years. Individual staff development activities fit together into a coherent plan that addresses school-wide and district-wide needs. Stages and activities may include assessing needs, planning, creating a favorable climate for change, conducting training sessions, and carrying out a range of formal and informal activities (e.g., coaching, study groups) designed to sustain training outcomes.

Key Components/Characteristics of Effective Training Sessions

A survey of the literature related to staff development practices indicates that effective training includes certain key characteristics. In order to be effective, researchers (Harris, 1985; Joyce & Showers, 1988; Lawson & Torres, 1988; Vaughan et al, 1989) generally agree that training sessions need to include the following key components in order to be most effective: (1) they need to relate directly to the participants' work context; (2) they need to incorporate principles of adult learning; (3) they need to include an orientation to training objectives and approaches; and (4) they need to include a focus on the concepts and knowledge base underlying specific instructional strategies. In addition, trainers, whether they be external consultants or local school staff, need to have both content and process expertise and the as well as the necessary skills to create a climate of mutual support and trust. Finally, some kind of follow-up to training activities is critical to sustaining training effects.

From the findings summarized above and from their early project experiences, RSSI staff have identified certain "key elements" in the delivery of systematic staff development: (1) goal match; (2) multiple sessions; (3) orientation; (4) collaboration; (5) practice/sharing; and (6) follow-up technical assistance and evaluation.

1. **Goals match.** Schools and schools districts need to have clearly specified goals for staff development outcomes. The purposes and approach of training activities need to match these goals. RSSI staff found that when the content matched the goals of the school or school district the training was easily translated into the classroom. It is important that schools and school district have clearly specified goals for staff development outcomes based on identified needs.

2. **Multiple sessions.** Staff development activities should be multiple and integrated, not one-shot or "episodic" sessions

focused on discrete topics.

3. **Orientation.** Participants need a thorough orientation to the purpose and content of staff development activities. That orientation should include the intent and long-term direction of the strategies or program presented; a rationale and background information, including relevant research-based information; the resource and logistical requirements of the new program or approach; and an evaluation of participants' readiness for the materials to be presented.

4. **Collaboration.** The staff development process should include multiple opportunities for collaboration among school staff, within formal training activities and ongoing throughout the school year. Collaborative activities may include information sharing, observing, mentoring, peer coaching, and planning.

5. **Practice/sharing.** Opportunities for practice and information sharing also need to be provided, both within training sessions and beyond.

6. **Follow-up assistance.** Service providers, whether internal school staff or external consultants, need to be available for follow-up support and assistance between training sessions. Moreover, formal and informal evaluation measures are readily available to monitor both short-term as well as long-term efforts.

In addition to the above key elements, RSSI staff have also identified certain key characteristics of effective training sessions. Effective training includes the following key elements:

1. It meets an identified **need.**
2. It follows a coherent **plan.**
3. It includes research-based **content.**
4. It includes the **processes** of **feedback, planning, demonstration, practice.**
5. It draws on the principles of **adult learning.**

Contextual Factors Contribute to Successful Training

As RSSI staff worked with trainers and school staffs, it was evident that contextual factors contributed to some schools experiencing more success than others. This is also evident in the research conducted by Joyce and Showers (1988) and others in the field who have indicated that effective staff development does not occur in a vacuum. Teacher development is a complex process, dependent on many nurturing factors. Initial efforts rely heavily on the contextual elements of the environments of both the school and to the training.

During its first two years, RSSI recruited and trained 600 educators, 100 staff development providers, 35 of whom worked with 30 demonstration sites in SEDL's five-state region. Because of a multiplier effect, the number of teachers and other educational professionals receiving services as a result of this cadre was well into the thousands by the end of the 1988-1989 school year. During all this training, certain contextual factors appeared to contribute to effective training as evidenced by the documentation gathered. Those factors included the following:

1. A superintendent in the "know"
2. Teacher orientation before or at the training
3. A "cheerleader in residence"
4. Time of day/day of week
5. Visibility of principals
6. Ownership/relevance of training
7. Presence of incentives
   college credit, released time, minimizing competing demands, training credits for staff development, Individual Performance Plans, etc.
8. Collegial interaction promoting centers of inquiry

Because of their interrelatedness, the absence of some contextual factors was not deemed as detrimental to the training. Instead, the absence of some appeared to offset others. For example, "a cheerleader-in-residence" along with some type of incentive emerged as factors that could possibly stand alone, with the "cheerleader" playing the most important part.

A Comprehensive Approach to Inservice Training Addresses At-Risk Students' Needs

The RSSI project staff have found that there are indeed certain key components and contextual features that characterize successful inservice training. Furthermore, they have

also found that it will take successful inservice training to help address the unmet educational needs of the ever-increasing at-risk student population. If we are to ensure that all students, including at-risk students, attain an adequate level of basic skills, it seems apparent that schools will have to change or organize differently than they have in the past because our dropout problem is not getting any better. This means inservice training approaches will also have to change if schools are to be effective in addressing the educational needs of their at-risk student population. It will not be enough to take a little of Program A and a little of Program B and hope for the best. Instead, schools will have to articulate a comprehensive plan or approach to ensure that at-risk students achieve success at each step in their schooling.

RSSI experience has found certain general principles and features that characterize such a comprehensive plan for addressing the at-risk students' educational needs. Some of those are outlined below:

1. **Effective at-risk programs are comprehensive.** One of the most important elements common to all effective programs is that they are **comprehensive programs**. In other words, they are well-planned, comprehensive approaches to instruction. Generally, they include detailed teacher's manuals and usually include curriculum materials, lesson guides, and other supportive material. Effective programs are not simply a series of workshops to give teachers strategies to add to their repertoire; rather, they are complete, systematic, carefully designed alternatives to traditional methods.

2. **Effective preventive and remedial programs for at-risk students are intensive.** Generally, programs designed to deal with special populations, including at-risk students, are successful only when they are **intensive**. That is, programs may use one-to-one tutoring or individually-adapted computer-assisted instruction to effectively meet the school needs of at-risk students.

3. **Effective at-risk programs frequently assess student progress and adapt instruction to individual student needs.** Virtually all programs found to be instructionally effective for at-risk students assess student progress frequently and the use the results to modify groupings or instructional content to meet students' individual needs.

4. **Effective at-risk programs emphasize prevention.** The cornerstone of a school plan to ensure success for all at-risk students is to make certain that all students learn to read the

> first time they are taught, so that they never become remedial readers. Perhaps the most important single element of prevention is to use programs in the first grade to ensure that students who do not make adequate progress in reading will receive immediate and intensive assistance. (Slavin & Madden, 1989).

It is obvious that our schools have failed to meet the educational needs of our at-risk student population. The statistics are clear: the dropout problem is not any better today than it was years ago. Thus, it is also clear that our schools will have to change their inservice training approaches in order to meet the educational needs of their at-risk student population. They will have to take a systematic and comprehensive approach to address those special needs. That approach is both necessary and possible for students at risk of dropping out. Every child can learn. That so many students fail to attain necessary basic skills reflects not the incapacity of the students but the incapacity of the schools to meet the needs of every child. Schools can indeed develop feasible programs to ensure that every child learns. But of course, it will also take effective inservice training individually-tailored to meet those program goals.

Summary

The content of this manuscript is not new nor is it innovative, but it is of utmost importance if schools are going to realize their goals for classroom implementation. Systematic staff development must take place, so that **goals set become goals met.** Most importantly, inservice training will be most effective if it is delivered by familiar providers who understand the special needs and problems of the audience (i.e., teachers dealing with at-risk students) as well as the unique needs of the community at large. There is no doubt that prevention and intervention classroom strategies for rural school dropouts can be successfully implemented in classrooms through systematic staff development. A generic cyclical process, systematic staff development addresses school improvement efforts through multiple training sessions incorporating adult learning elements. The same process provides and promotes collegial interaction, fostering teacher support systems for addressing the needs of rural students "at-risk" of dropping out of school.

REFERENCES

Harris, B. M., (1985). Program Implementation Strategies. *Supervisory Behavior in Education.* New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Hoover, W., Foley, D., Boethel, M., and Smith, M., (1989). *Staff Development in Rural, Small Schools: A View From Rural Educators in the Southwest.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Joyce, B. and Showers, B., (1988). *Student Achievement through Staff Development.* New York: Longman, Inc.

Lawson, G.H. and Torres, M.E. (1988). *Goals Met: A Manual for Effective Training.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Rural Small Schools Initiative.

Regional Laboratory of Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands and National Staff Development Council, (1987). *Continuing to Learn: A Guidebook for Teacher Development.* Massachusetts.

Rural, Small Schools Initiative Self Assessment Report, (1989). Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Slavin, R. E. and Madden, N.A. (1989). What works for students at risk: a research synthesis. *Educational Leadership, 46*(5).

Sparks, D. (June, 1988). *What We Know About Effective Staff Development.* Paper and presentation delivered at the annual meeting of the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association. Austin, Texas.

Vaughan, M., Boethel, M., Hoover, W., Lawson, G., and Torres, M.E. (1989). *Conditions and Needs of Rural Education in the Southwest Region.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Wood, F. & Kleine, P.F. (October, 1987). *Staff Development Research and Rural Schools: A Critical Appraisal.* Paper prepared for the National Rural Education Research Forum. Lake Placid, New York.